

# Normative reasons

A survey of internalism

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*Neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin to the object, for this knowledge never takes root in an alien nature; so that no man who is not naturally inclined and akin to justice and all other forms of excellence, even though he may be quick at learning and remembering this and that and other things, nor any man who, though akin to justice, is slow at learning and forgetful, will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue. (Plato 1997: 1661)*

## **1. Introduction**

In this thesis I will discuss Bernard Williams's influential papers on internalism of practical reasons (Williams 1981; 1987; 1985; 1995; 2000; 2001).<sup>1</sup> I will measure the success of his internalism by comparing it with three competing theories of practical reasons: externalism, moral rationalism, and cognitivism.

The first of these, externalism of practical reasons, is the one that perhaps conflict the most with what Williams has to say on the topic. I will centre my attention on Derek

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper it suffices to associate Internalism with the presentation of Williams. John Robertson gives a thorough exposition of the many confusing theories on internalism and externalism. (Robertson in Millgram 2001: chapter 7)

Parfit's (1997; 2001; 2002) account of externalism.<sup>2</sup> I think this position is the least successful in presenting a viable alternative, or an objection, to Williams. I believe this is partly due to some misunderstandings of what Williams says about motivation and reason. Much attention is therefore given to a clear exposition of Williams's claims and where I believe Parfit does not pay internalism its due. The second alternative I will present, moral rationalism, is more a modification or critique of what Williams takes internalism to be (Korsgaard 1986). The modification concerns the structure of practical reason and is not a threat to Williams central thesis of internalism. The last alternative I will present is that of John McDowell (1995, 1998). This is the position I favour, and the latter part of this thesis is dedicated to present why I think he is right to dispute the *psychologistic* character of internalism.

In the rest of this introduction I will present the background for the whole subject. In 1.1 and 1.2 and 1.3 I want to say something general on different types of reasons – especially normative and motivational – and how we can distinguish between them. The difference of internalism and externalism will come into focus. In 1.4 I will explain how this relate to practical reason, and I will briefly touch on the view of Korsgaard. Lastly, in 1.5 and 1.6, I will close in on one crucial premise and its background that internalism relies on, and which will be essential in the presentation of McDowell in chapter 6.

## **1.1 Reasons**

If I say to another person “you should do this” or “if I were you”, I can mean different things. The intention may be nothing more than pointing to some fact that could be informative for the person to know off. Such a fact could simply be that I know that it is better to take the train, because the buss leaves later. In more serious matters than that, my advisory is based on an assumption that I have some sort of important background, knowledge or experience, which would be prudent for the person to take into consideration. Implications like the first just aim at general prudence of pragmatic, maybe trivial, matters – but in the latter, more important ones, the intention of advices may also

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<sup>2</sup> My reading and understanding of Parfit's externalism is supported by the quite extensive literature on the subject. See (Scanlon 2000; Raz 2005; Quinn 1993, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Platts 1980)

be to encourage due consideration to some sort of rational and moral commitment. What are advices of prudence, and what are rational and moral advices, can be difficult to keep strictly apart. If my advice is that you should play tennis rather than golf, it might only imply that it is my experience that tennis is more convenient to entertain in this area. But, if meant more seriously, the implication could be that tennis is healthier than golf, and that health is a substantial element of what it is to be rational. If the intention of such an advice does not carry with it any distinction between what is rational and what is moral, the advice might also express a request for some kind of moral commitment on your behalf. Where the line between morality and rationality goes – if there is a line at all – can be disputed, but sometimes it is apparent that the advice concerns questions of morality: “You should stop beating your wife like that”. It is clear that this statement concerns morality, but it is an open question what moral here means.

In the literature these issues are addressed with reference to reasons. Sentences like “he has a reason to do x”, mean either that the person has a prudential reason to do x, or it can mean that he has a moral reason to do x – or, it can mean both. Some would say that there is a difference between reasons of prudence and reasons of morality, whereas others deny such a difference.

The most debated reason-distinction however, is the question concerning motivational and normative reasons – and their relation. Some scholars insist that there must be a factual connection between the reason-statement and the motivational make up of agents, while others have no such requirement. There rests thus an ambiguity in reason statements.

## **1.2 Normative and motivational reasons**

Motivating reasons are the reasons that agents have in the moment of action, reasons which can figure in explanations of the agents’ actions. Normative reasons are those considerations that *should* sway anyone to act in one way or another.

So when I did my homework as a teenager, my motivating reason was that I did not want to become on a bad footing with my parents, whereas the normative reason could be something like it is important to acquire knowledge before entering adulthood.

Talking about motivating reasons is often connected with – at least this is what Humeans want us to think – desires or pro-attitudes of some sort, often in a permissive sense. Normative reasons does not necessarily yield such a connection, on the contrary, it might seem that they should be kept strictly apart from any such or similar connotation. Disregarding what agents themselves refer to as normative, and giving the ideally good third party observer free play to judge what the agent should be motivated to do, is then what normative means. The ideally observer can resemble everything from the *phronimos* in Aristotle's terminology, to the Kantian deontological hero, or perhaps Mill's utilitarian omni-scientist. The general idea is that there is some external point from which objectivity of morality and rationality can be judged. These constraints on morality and rationality are what I will, from now on, call a strong interpretation of normative.

If however there is some moral sceptics, a-moralists or lets say non-moral agents, that refuses to respond to considerations involved in normativity, the latter is in danger of being deemed irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> A goal of moral philosophy is thus to cope with the moral sceptic. A tempting thought might be to judge the moral sceptic as irrational, and wish that some form of convincing argument could persuade him into morality. The problem with this is that moral argumentation, condemnation, counselling etc., targeted at these people runs the danger of being futile and empty – if they have no effect whatsoever on the people meant to move. Treating such people as susceptible to change, when they are not, is pointless at best and maybe immoral.

### **1.3 The practical requirement**

This reflection opens up the possibility of a different sense of normativity, which takes this problem seriously into account. Normativity is now connected with practical concerns, with what the agents themselves regard as rational and moral in ethical coping, leaving aside what the ideal observer thinks. The goal is to explain actions, what people actually do, and why they did it. A normative and abstract judgement may say little of this, as its concern is not on how people act, but how they should act.

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<sup>3</sup> A problem that I think is elegantly presented in the battle between Socrates and Callicles in the dialogue *Gorgias* (Plato1997).



If explanation of action, what Michael Smith (1995: 6-7) calls the practical requirement, is the overall goal of ascribing reasons to agents, normative reasons can also mean what particular agents themselves would regard as normative when coming to know the relevant facts. If the third party observer regards something as a reason that all should respond to, but the agent in question cannot – given his own rationality – respond to this reason however factually and rationally informed he becomes, then the third party's judgment is irrelevant. There has to be – in one way or another – some psychological connection between the observer's judgment and the agent's motivational make up. The teenager might realize that preparing oneself for adulthood is a reason for him to do his homework. One can then say that the normative reason he had all along has become his motivating reason. But normative here means something the agent himself was able to understand he had reason to do, something he could reach by some sort of deliberation. Bernard Williams's (2000) Internalism about reasons is such an interpretation of normative, and makes the truth of normative judgements relative to – dependant upon – the desires and attitudes not of the observer making the judgement but *of the person the judgement is about*. I call this a weak interpretation of normative.

The weak interpretation of normativity is internalism, while the strong interpretation of normativity is associated with externalism – a label congenial to scholars like Parfit (1997). His externalism draws its metaphysical essence from moral realism – the view that there are moral facts in the world, on the analogy with scientific facts. This view is about moral truth and values that exist independently of us as agents.

#### **1.4 Practical reason**

The connection between motivating reasons and normative reasons are very different on the two accounts. On Williams's account there is a very close connection, whereas for the stronger version of normativity it is not. To illustrate the difference between internalism and externalism further, we should answer a different question. What is it that happens when the teenager comes to recognize that he has a reason to do his homework when he

previously did not? In other words, how is one to understand this transition from not being motivated by a normative reason to being so?

Parfit's externalist so far presented is not interested in how this transition comes about. We can call him a rational absolutist because acting in a non-virtuous way is always non-rational or perhaps even irrational for an agent. The absolutist insist on his right to disregard the practical requirement altogether.

We can, however, resist this account of externalism and take the practical requirement seriously. We may then insist that it is relevant to speak of what the virtuous man has reason to do when speaking of motivational transitions of non-virtuous persons. It is now a shift of focus away from what reasons are true of agents to the question of whether they have entertained the reasons they have in a rational manner (Korsgaard 1986). Let's call this moral rationalism. It agrees with internalism that reasons must have a psychological basis, but disagrees with internalism that this precludes the perspective of the virtuous man. The virtuous man's reasons are so to speak within all people. What people often lack is the ability to rationally recognise reasons that have been true all along. In this sense reasons are not external after all, as the absolutists assumes, they have been internal all the time. Williams (2000: 35) calls the transition from not being motivated by a normative reason to being so 'sound deliberation'. His understanding puts limits on what sound reasoning can mean, limiting it to success factors that the agent himself is capable of recognizing, and which often are not the same as to that of the virtuous person. The rationalist would, on the contrary, say that these success factors are the capacity only of the virtuous person, but that this capacity somehow is relevant to all. Rationalism of reasons is thus a more modified version of internalism and questions the structure of reason that Williams present us with.

### **1.5 Background**

Much of the controversy surrounding these questions can be traced back to David Hume (1976). His famous quote that 'I can want the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger', gives an unmistakably hint of the central place desire plays in his theory on moral psychology – for Hume, desire stands over and above reason.

Philosophers favouring this non-cognitivist theory of human psychology must also account for what exactly the difference between desire and reason is. If not, the argument of Bittner (2001) may threaten to render much of modern moral philosophy to babble – claiming as he does that the desire-belief dichotomy is an old orthodoxy going all the way back to Plato. I will come back to this objection later.

To get a clear understanding of what exactly the difference between desire and reason consist in, we can take advantage of the famous argument of Anscombe (1957) – an argument Williams gives his explicit endorsement to in *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Williams 1987). In order then for us to get a clear picture of his argument in “Internal and external Reasons” (IER) – and further measure it against the background that externalists argue from – it is of vital importance to understand this argument. The overall goal of Anscombe’s argument is to demonstrate what the difference between belief and desire consists of. She does this through her famous shopping-list analogy.

### **1.6 Direction of fit**

Let us presume a guy walking inside a store with a shopping-list. We assume that he wishes the shopping-list to correspond with what is in his basket. The list represents his desire to match the world that is here instantiated by the basket. Let us further imagine a detective surveying the conduct of this man. The detective is writing down, on his own list, the groceries that the man is putting in the basket. This report is then representing those beliefs the detective acquires of what the world, the basket, is like. The whole point is to see the different mental purposes the two lists have. The first list represents desire, which goal is to match the world, whereas the second represent belief, which goal is to match the mind. The man is striving to make the world match what he wants, while the detective is trying to get a grip off what the world is like. The first is what Anscombe has labelled ‘mind to world direction of fit’, whereas the latter she calls ‘world to mind direction of fit’. (Anscombe 1957; Vogler 2001)

Williams's dependence on direction of fit, or the belief-desire dichotomy, might run his argument in IER into troubles. Later on, I will present Parfit's externalist arguments that just as much as Williams's rely on this dichotomy. The last version I will discuss here is McDowell's (1995) account of reasons. He has, just like Bittner, much of the same scepticism towards this belief-desire dichotomy. This scepticism is to some extent the background for his objections to Williams's internalism. He asks us to consider whether sound reasoning depicted as a rational procedure is the right picture of how transitions are effected. Why cannot a transition to considering the matter aright be effectuated by a practical reason that is characterized by conversion or inspiration? Practical reason is now dependent on values, but not on the account of values that Parfit offers.

The way this transition takes place; what belief and desire denote; what sound deliberation could mean; what is plausible and sufficient as an account of practical rationality; and whether there are values for real, have all implications for the controversy about practical reasons. The shape the answers to these questions are given determine what normative means, and what the connection between normative and motivational reasons is.

## **2 Internalism**

I have so far presented some background and basic ideas of that which is central in this subject. From these general comments surrounding the topic, I will now go on to present internalism more thoroughly. In 2.1 and 2.2 I will present Williams's internalism, and in 2.3 I will outline why he is sceptical towards the notion of external reasons.

### **2.1 Internal and external reasons**

Williams depends his argument on direction of fit. A reason for drinking what you think is a glass of gin and tonic in front of you can be explained by Williams as having a desire to drink gin and tonic, linked with the belief that the glass in front of you does indeed

contain gin and tonic. The true belief and the true desire together constitute a reason for drinking the glass. What are needed then to have a complete reason explanation of any given action are the relevant beliefs and desires.

In Williams's argument in "Internal and external reasons", more precisely in his analyzes of sentences of the form 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' we get his version of reasons for action. A is an agent and  $\phi$  refers to a verb of action. He argues that the sentence 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' can be understood in two ways. The first way is as follows: The meaning of the sentence can be explicated by ascribing some desire or motivation S to A. How this desire S should be understood, will be outlined later, but as for now S suffices. The sentence 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' can be true, if the  $\phi$ -ing of A satisfies some element in A's S. Then and only then is the sentence 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' possibly true. If the sentence's truth-value does not depend on this S, the sentence will be false. The core aspect of this interpretation is thus characterized by limiting the possibilities of making the sentence true, by referring to something in the agent's desire. This is not sufficient, though, for Williams position to make the sentence true. He needs another requirement to. This is because the sentence 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' might be false even though the desire condition is present. The truth value of the sentence is also dependent on the beliefs in question, which yields the possibility that S might be based upon the false belief that  $\phi$ -ing will satisfy some element in S, when in fact it does not. Lets illustrate with the gin and tonic example.

The agent wants to drink gin, and seeing a bottle of what he believes to be gin, drinks it. But what appeared to be gin was in fact petrol. The agent has then acquired his desire S to drink gin on the false belief that the bottle contains gin, when in fact it does not. What is necessary so as to judge the agent as internally rational is that he has deliberated correctly about how the world is. (I will later come back to what Williams means with correct deliberation.) The adequacy of A's desire must in some way be dependent upon correct beliefs. We can now conclude by saying that the sentence 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' is true, when A both has a desire and has deliberated rationally. In a postscript on IEA Williams tells us:

‘A has a reason to  $\phi$  only if there is a sound deliberate route from A’s subjective motivational set to A’s  $\phi$ -ing.’ (Williams 2001: 91)

This is Williams’s conclusive sentence of internalism of reasons for action. Williams thinks this is a necessary condition for reason statements. Whether it also yields a sufficient condition is not argued for. There are three things about this sentence that must be given due consideration. First of all, it is important to have, what Michael Smith calls the practical requirement, in mind. In order for us to explain action we have to say something distinctively about that particular agent A, which can justify us in saying that it is true that ‘A has a reason to  $\phi$ ’. The latter part of the sentence, ‘...from A’s subjective motivational set’, accounts for this condition. Another crucial feature of the conclusion is to understand what ‘sound deliberate route’ means. Last but not least, it is important to give due consideration to what Williams means with motivation, or what he refers to as the agent’s S, or subjective motivational set. Before going on to discuss, why Williams thinks, based on these premises, that there are only internal reasons, I will say some more on these crucial premises of his argument.

## **2.2 Desire and deliberation**

That Williams is some kind of humean is for sure – and that he regards mind to world direction of fit as primary in moral psychology. But how are we to delimit and understand the term desire, apart from being in a dynamic relationship with deliberation. A statically definition of desire, according to Williams, is too narrow to make it plausible in accounting for internalism. The term connotes not only the fixed sense commonly associated with desire, but also ‘...such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent.’

It is important to notice this open reading of S. It is constituted by a close interplay with deliberation. Just as important is it to understand what Williams means with deliberation, which itself is a term that needs further clarifications. If only understood as means-end

reasoning one reduces internalism to some sort of instrumentalism – the view Williams calls the sub-Humean model of practical reasoning.<sup>4</sup> This model makes any element of S susceptible for the validation of an internal reason statement. If drinking petrol is what you want, it would in fact be rational to drink it. This is not an internal reason according to Williams, because the desire depends on a wrong belief that petrol is good for one. Internalism is not solely concerned about explanation of action, but also of the rationality of the agents. An argument that does not distinguish between explanation of actions based on true and false beliefs

...looks in the wrong direction, by implying in effect that the internal reason conception is only concerned with explanation, and not at all with the agent's rationality, and this may help to motivate a search for other sorts of reasons, which are connected with his rationality. But the internal reason conception is concerned with the agent's rationality. What we can correctly ascribe to him in a third-personal internal reason statement is also what he can ascribe to himself as a result of deliberation. (Williams 1981: 102)

The rationality in question is accounted for by some way of sound deliberation, for instance figuring out what is the most 'convenient, economical, pleasant etc. way of satisfying some element in S, and this of course is controlled by other elements in S'. (Williams 1981: s 104)

But deliberation can be many other things as well: Finding out which of the desires, maybe conflicting ones, one wishes the most; time-management in order to satisfy and combine more elements in S. Last but not least it is important to confer a central place for the imagination (Ibid.). Reflection in all of these modes, and many more, sees to it that an agent may discover new reasons previously unaware of, or that he has to give up reasons that he thought he had all along<sup>5</sup>. The final outcome of these considerations surrounding internal reason statements – given the wide and generous sense of desire and deliberation – can be that they often will turn out quite instable, fluctuating, and

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<sup>4</sup> Whether Williams's internalism is a sophisticated version of instrumentalism, I will discuss later.

<sup>5</sup> Motivation here can be misleading, and some scholars have – in my opinion – not paid Williams's account of S and its relation to sound deliberation, its due. In discussions of insensitive agents they argue that there may be agents that have entertained a sound deliberation from a desire to phi, but does not phi, on the grounds that they are insensitive to this desire. I think this misses Williams's point, because he simply would question whether there really was sound deliberation from the agent's desires. He would agree that these challenges might refute the sub-humean model, but insist that they do no harm to his argument. See (Goldstein 2004; Millgram 1996)

uncertain. This is a feature not deploring to Williams, but something he sees as an advantage for internalism. It is plausible to think that many people may have difficulties about figuring out what to do or what they want. I will now explain why Williams disputes the tenability of external reasons statements of the sort ‘A has a reason to  $\phi$ ’.

### **2.3 Williams’s argument against externalism**

According to Williams they both agree, the externalist and the internalist, that ‘A has a reason to  $\phi$ ’ is false when desires are based on wrong beliefs. But Williams’s externalist wants more. He wants the sentence’s truth-value to be entirely independent of the practical requirement. Consider a person that maltreats his wife, and that acquires no new motivation to stop doing this even after sound reasoning. Williams tells us that the externalist still wants to say that the person has a reason – assuming she is unhappy – to stop beating his wife. These sentences express what Williams calls external reason statements. Williams’s problem with this is that he is not satisfied with the justification the externalist gives of such statements.

the external reasons statement itself will have to be taken as roughly equivalent to, or at least as entailing, the claim that if the agent rationally deliberated then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to  $\phi$  (Williams 1981: 109)

The upshot of externalism is that one must give an affirmative answer to Hume’s question whether reason alone can make one acquire a new motivation. In other words; pure reasoning itself can bring about a new motivation that in no way is controlled by prior motivation. Williams thinks Hume was right in expressing strong doubts about reasoning that could be pure in this sense. So does McDowell: ‘If the rational cogency of a piece of deliberation is in no way dependent on prior motivations, how can we comprehend its giving rise to a new motivation?’ (McDowell 1998: 99)

Assuming Williams and McDowell are right in expressing this doubt, where does this leave us with external reason statements? They are all false, says Williams. (Williams 1981: 109) In denying them, Williams says:



What is the difference supposed to be between saying that the agent has a reason to act more considerately, and saying one of the many other things we can say to people whose behaviour does not accord with what we think it should be? As, for instance, that it would be better if they acted otherwise? (Williams 2000: 39-40)

There is something suspicious with external reason statements if they cannot explain what and how they are relevant. Saying someone has a reason to act otherwise, when he does not know, or ever will, is bluffing.<sup>6</sup>

Williams considers it more honest to say of someone with this psychology that they are cruel, inconsiderate, insensitive etc. External reason statements cannot obtain anything more, but will instead become more judgmental, moralistic and rhetorical. External reason statements are then nothing but bluff, and there seems little reason to offer them any legitimate role in ethics.

it would make a difference to ethics if certain kinds of internal reason were very generally to hand... But what difference would external reasons make?... Should we suppose that, if genuine external reasons were to be had, morality might get some leverage on a squeamish Jim or priggish George, or even on the fanatical Nazi?... I cannot see what leverage it would secure: what would these external reasons do to these people, or for our relations to them.(ibid)

Williams makes a convincing case for refuting ethical argumentation that comes under the classification of externalism. Just as some reason statements are irrelevant to the encouragement of getting chimpanzees to act differently, so they are to people. But how often will it be the case that reason statements are irrelevant and merely a bluff? Williams says:

'In saying this, however, we have to bear in mind how strong these assumptions are, and how seldom we are likely to think that we know them to be true. But people often do, and wish to be concerned about what is good or worth achieving.' (Williams 1981: 105-106)

For most people there is indeed a need for general and abstract reason statements, statements that can be true of us. We can be right in making something similar to external reasons statements, hoping that they can become internal reason statement; what Williams calls optimistic internal reason statements. This will, however, always run the risk of being external reason statements. The reason for allowing this risk is that there

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<sup>6</sup> Externalists like Parfit disagree with this because they distinguish between A's *having* a reason and *there is* a reason for A. I will come back to this.

might be very difficult to know when a reason statement is relevant, i.e. the problem of knowing the line to be drawn between the bluff that external reason statements commit themselves to and optimistic internal reason statements. It is difficult to know the relevancy because people often do not know what they have reasons to want and do, and that there is, because of this, often a rational route to statements that might on the face of it seem rather optimistic.

## **2.4 Summary of Internalism**

We can now sum up Williams's theory of reasons for action. He is basing himself on Anscombe's argument on 'direction of fit' – the soundness of which is crucial for his argument. Moreover, if being successful in a refutation of his theory, these four premises must especially be paid its due:

1. The metaphysical primacy of S (Reasoning starts with S)
2. The liberal constituency – often indeterminacy – of S
3. The open sense in which sound deliberation should be understood
4. The practical requirement

Taken together these premises accounts for internalism about reasons for action.

Sentences of the form 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' can, according to Williams, never take on anything but the internal interpretation, which says that there are only internal reasons for actions. He contrasts this interpretation, which according to him is the correct one, with what he calls the external interpretation. The externalist position Williams is sketching might not however be exhaustive of externalism.

We can apply different strategies to refute Williams's scepticism about external reason statements: Each premise can be refuted on its own giving the externalist the room he needs to establish a coherent position. But though an argument stands firm on own ground, it can also figure as an integrated element of the other premises as well. These philosophical controversies are so interconnected, that the dispute on one of the premises often goes hand in hand with those of others.

One of Williams's most ardent opponents in this respect is Derek Parfit.

Parfit's Externalism claims that Williams's argument against it does not succeed in refuting all there is to say about it. He thinks Williams's interpretation of external reasons statements is too psychological. He tries to make room for externalism in the way Williams deny. Reasons are about truth and not about psychological considerations. His moral realism gives an affirmative answer to whether reason alone can give rise to a new motivation. Korsgaard and McDowell maintain a different strategy to refute Williams's Internalism and accept the psychological premise – the practical requirement. Korsgaard makes room for the idea that *all people* have something in their motivational make up S wherefrom sound reasoning could issue into right action. She develops her argument by primarily exploiting aspects of premise 2 and 3, respectively how S and sound reasoning should be understood.

McDowell is offering a defence of externalism by overthrowing the whole paradigm, which both Williams and Parfit rely on. He rejects the different ways the distinctions and conceptualizations figure in the discursion. This overthrow makes it possible to question whether true reasons statements have to be acquired through sound deliberation. He thinks not: one can come to believe something that has been true all along without depending on the picture of practical reason that Williams draws. I will argue that McDowell and Korsgaard in many respects are more sympathetic to Williams's theory than to Parfit's, and that the forthcoming presentation of Parfit's Externalism is the one that truly can be said to be externalism.

### **3. Externalism**

In this chapter I will present Parfit's account of externalism. I will in 3.1 and 3.2 describe how this relates to ethical realism, how reasons depend on values in the world. In 3.3 I will say something on the way this connect with his understanding of practical reason.

#### **3.1 Parfit and ethical realism**

If we now assume that there actually is an Archimedean point – a moral corrective for all practical reasons – externalism can have an opening. This Archimedean point figures as an all-pervading background that all action can be measured against. A theory of practical reasons will on this background have implications for how we judge reasons and rationality of actions. This picture is associated with externalism.

There is hardly anyone that can be said to fit in more with the externalist camp than Parfit, claiming as he does, that there are only external reasons<sup>7</sup>. He and Williams disagree about what facts are, but also about the sense that should be given to practical reasoning. Parfit's (1997) objection to internalism relates to – on the one hand – whether one can have a moral duty to do something, and then also a reason, but fail to be motivated – even after informed deliberation. He thinks so on the assumption that external reason statements obligates everyone, because there is something that always is the right thing to do – independently of whether agents are moved by this obligation. His objection gives an affirmative answer to the question of whether there are any moral facts in the world.

On the other hand, if there always is something that is the right thing to do, something that can be judged right or wrong according to a universal realm of reasons, that also makes one see practical reasoning in a different manner. Practical reasoning is now much closer to theoretical reasoning than it is for Williams, because it is, just as with theoretical reason, measured against a real subject matter (Quinn 1993c: 233).

Parfit's two objections are, in short, his defense of externalism. One of those has to do with what facts and values are, and the other to our reception and processing of them. The following presentation will show that practical reasons based on these assumptions takes on a very different reading. I will first present Parfit's understanding of values.

### **3.2 Values**

Reason statements becomes, on his reading, normative in the strong sense – meaning that the agent has an external reason statement true of him to act in some way or the other, disregarding whether he is – or ever will become – motivated by the reason statement.

Parfit is an ethical realist and thinks normative statements are aiming for truth. He says that all reasons are external simply because they are based on facts or values, and not on facts of the motivational make up as Williams claims:

What gives us reasons to act are not facts about our own motivation, but facts about our own or other people's well-being, or facts about other things that are worth achieving, or – some would add – moral requirements.<sup>8</sup>

Reasons are what they are in virtue of these facts, for instance distinctive features of objects, which in its turn trigger a psychological response in the patient. He distinguishes between four kinds of value-based reasons: Intrinsic object-given, instrumental object-given, intrinsic state-given, and instrumental state-given.

As all these reasons are considered something good for people to appreciate and aim for, they confer strong guiding on the wellbeing of either oneself or of others. Wellbeing of others, for instance, is something Parfit regards as an intrinsic object-given reason. In other words: if you are suffering it will be good in itself for me to relieve it. This does not mean, however, that your relief from pain cannot have good consequences as well; if it for instance gives you a chance to experience and learn from the value of social sympathy. But the reason for me to relieve your suffering is now not only intrinsic object-given it is also instrumental object-given. Moreover, my wish to help you can in itself be intrinsically good, and having it can also be instrumentally good in making a bystander more inclined to help others in similar situations in the future. These last two types of value-based reasons, intrinsic state-given and instrumental state-given, completes the picture. (Parfit 2001: 22)

One fact alone can thus manifest all four types of reasons, but often it does not. Taking the bus to catch a meeting is usually instrumentally. But in the end of a chain of instrumental reasons there will be some intrinsic reasons that need no further justification. This justification is in the end fully accounted for when it is constituted by facts and values about oneself or other people's wellbeing, values that carries with them a distinctively moral efficacy, independent and externally of agents. (Parfit 2001: *ibid*)

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<sup>8</sup> Parfit alludes to Kant when mentioning moral requirements; i.e. the categorical imperative. I think Korsgaard gives another picture of Kantian ethics than Parfit. I will come back to this.

Parfit agrees that we have desires that can help explain actions, but have a different understanding of how they do so. He is not so much concerned about the desires we actually have as *what* made us have them in the first place. Desires figure in explanation of actions because of the beliefs – dependent upon facts – that gave us reasons to have them. Parfit's principal aim is thus to explain our desires as dependent upon external facts about the world, facts that are rationally accessible for anyone fully rational.

Internalists derive conclusions about reasons from psychological claims about the motivation that, under certain conditions, we would in fact have. Externalists derive, from normative claims about what is worth achieving, conclusions about reasons, and about the motivation that we ought to have.

Based on this he now makes a claim about reasons:

If we consider only reasons for acting, Internalism may seem to be broadly right, or to contain most of the truth. But the most important reasons are not merely, or mainly, reasons for acting. They are also reasons for having the desires on which we act. These are reason to want something, for its own sake, which are provided by facts about this thing. Such reasons we can call value-based. Since Internalist theories are desire-based, they cannot recognize such reasons. (Parfit 2001: 19)

He seeks to give an answer to *why* we have the desires that figure in explanation of actions. When reason statements are considered only in relation to a given isolated moment of action, he thinks internalism is 'broadly right'. But if the explanations demand for a richer and more comprehensible justification for the desires figuring in the explanation, it seems that internalism comes short. When extending the domain of reasons for action like this, we are entering domains of inquiries of what the agent should have done, and what the agent could have done – had he been fully rational. The upshot of such an inquiry will eventually conclude that there are intrinsic object given reasons that all people should want to act upon. These are facts or values that have intrinsic worth, values that internalism and Williams, according to Parfit, cannot recognize. (I will come back to this later) For Parfit it is fewer limits to the questions that should be addressed in explanation of action. This also goes for what can be counted as sound deliberation.

### 3.3 Substantial reasoning

Closely intertwined with this disagreement of what reasons are, is the disagreement of what sound deliberation is. If we ask why we have the desires we have, sound deliberation takes on a different meaning. Parfit argues that sound deliberation for Williams means some kind of procedural deliberation – deliberation with a rather instrumental character.

- 1) A has a reason to  $\phi$  entails that, if A knew the relevant facts, and deliberated in a way that was procedurally rational, A would be motivated to  $\phi$ .

Parfit argues for another picture, for what he calls substantial reasoning:

- 2) A has a reason to  $\phi$  entails that, if A knew the relevant facts, and were fully substantively rational, A would be motivated to  $\phi$ . (Parfit 1997: 3)

Substantial reasoning so understood is normative, because it involves some sort of wellbeing. Wellbeing is not merely self-regarding, but, just as important, concerns wellbeing of others as well. When reasoning takes this form it is not procedural, but aim at truth, about what is good, and consequently about how to live. The centrality of the veridical aspect of substantial here is essential. Whereas Williams is suspicious of what truth can mean in ethics and rationality, Parfit makes practical reasoning a veridical enterprise. Practical reasoning is then not altogether different from theoretical reasoning, because both have a subject matter – the first is about what is true in virtue of what is good, where as the latter is true in virtue of how the world is.

Where Williams differ from Parfit is about what can be counted as facts.

Remember the question of whether the glass in front of you contains petrol or gin. Facts like this must figure as rational and normative constraints on agents. As Williams say:

‘any rational deliberative agent has in his S a general interest in being factually and rationally informed.’(Williams 1981) Whereas all agents can be said to have a normative interest in being informed of facts that are necessary in ordinarily day-to-day coping, there is a limit to what can be deemed relevant facts for agents to know off.

Whereas procedural reasoning is just about getting things right with facts on the lines of the examples above, substantial reasoning involves facts that concern morality and long term prudence as well. Rational coping has to do – as I understand Parfit – with perception of values out there in the world. A world that is not disenchanted and deprived of all values – the picture Williams is favouring. Desires are secondary, in that they depend on the empowerment of practical reasoning, a reasoning that is substantially related to the world where values in the world can make its own impact on the agent. Practical reasoning should not be a neutral, subjective business, but should process its belief and desires through wellbeing. The success of substantial reasoning is then what is at stake for agents – how well a person aims for the truth.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Internalism or externalism?**

In this chapter I will discuss and try to sort out some disagreements, but also some insufficiency in interpretation between the two theories presented so far. As this is rather complicated I will give much attention to it. I will consider how successful Parfit is in claiming that Williams cannot recognize intrinsic object given reasons. The claim is an argument meant to counter anti-realism, but in 4.2 and 4.3 I will try to show that Parfit perhaps has interpreted internalism too narrowly. In 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 I will discuss dispassionate reasoning and how that can challenge internalism.

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<sup>9</sup> There are two ways to be successful in practical reasoning, and there are two ways to be unsuccessful – i.e. full rationality has two different requirements. On the one side one is rational when what is wanted depends on a coherent set of beliefs. This is not however to be fully rational. What is crucial for Parfit is that the content of the beliefs in question is correct: ‘What makes our desires rational is not the rationality of the beliefs on which they depend, it is the content of these beliefs.’ (Parfit 2001: 29) The content here evidently alludes to values.



#### 4.1 Parfit's argument against Williams

If we now consider Williams's practical requirement again: Why does Parfit still want to say that 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' is valid independently of the motivational requirement.

Parfit is aware of Williams's insistence on meeting the practical requirement. As Parfit says, it is an empirical question for Williams whether an agent has a reason or not – but not for him. (Parfit 1997: 4) The question is purely normative, and makes it the case that there are reasons true of all agents less than fully rational, even though unaware of them. These reasons are intrinsic object given reasons. Williams cannot recognize these reasons because, on the internalist view, all reasons are provided by facts about motivation. If I want your suffering to end, it is my wanting your suffering to end that gives me a reason. Externalism, on the other hand, can recognize the ending of your suffering as something good in itself, i.e. an intrinsic object given reason (Parfit 2001: 23).

In recognizing intrinsic object given reasons, Parfit voices his ethical realism. He can say that Williams cannot recognize such reasons because Williams is an anti-realist where reasons are provided by desires.

We can use an analogy with mathematics to discuss whether Williams must deny Parfit's claim. (Quinn 1993c: 228) In mathematics there are two schools of thought; some believe that we *discover* mathematical facts, while others assert that we *invent* them. The same question can be applied in practical reason: Do we *discover* moral facts, or do we *invent* them? It is evident that Parfit is inclined towards discovery. His outlook assures us that there are values that can be discovered. This is why he can say that there are intrinsic object given reasons: facts that have been true all the time. Williams is in this regard more sceptical, as he finds it hard to believe that any position along ethical realism-lines will ever succeed. He thinks Aristotle is the one that has been closest to establishing something of a moral Archimedean point – but in the end it too failed (Williams 1987: 30-53) Williams would instead say that we invent facts that for sure play an important role in society and inter-human behaviour, and as such can be considered true. But these moral values are not external to our appreciation of them, and so cannot be said to confer

upon us a special authority – as scientific facts indeed do. So Williams would say that intrinsic object given reason couldn't be just that; they can be fully accounted for only by some facts of our motivational make up. There now seems to be a stalemate, as the differences between Parfit's realism and Williams's anti-realism run too deep for reconciliation.

#### 4.2 Williams's reply

Williams would probably agree of the exposition of his anti-realism above, but he does not think it has paid justice to the argument of "Internal and external reasons" (IER)(Williams 1981). As the matter of fact has it, Williams would insist that Parfit has not answered the question he, Williams, asks. This is because what he argues in IER might only be loosely connected with that in *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (ELP)(Williams 1987).<sup>10</sup> Let's investigate this further. In ELP his question is concerned to defend some kind of anti-realism. It is thus tempting to assume that his internalism is indebted to the thought central in this book.

But Williams's intention with writing IER is to settle the question of what one has reason to do while taking the practical requirement seriously – not to refute some theory of ethical realism. Williams can then say that a refutation of IER should answer to the same assumption; that we also want an empirical foundation for practical reasons.<sup>11</sup> Parfit does not want to answer the question Williams asks in IER:

Williams assumes that claims about reasons could achieve only two things. If such claims cannot get inside people, by inducing them to act differently, they can only designate these people. On the first alternative, these claims would have motivating force. On the second, they would be merely classificatory, since their meaning would be only that, if these people were not so vile, or were in some other way different, they would act differently. (Parfit 1997: 112)

Not surprisingly, Parfit says there is a third possibility: 'Even if such claims do not have motivating force, they could be more than merely classificatory. They could have *normative* force (Parfit 1997: *ibid*). Williams would not, however, concur entirely with

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<sup>10</sup> In this book Williams expresses a somewhat gloomy picture of current thoughts in moral philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> 'Empirical' is an unfortunate reading of Williams practical requirement, because it may mistakenly imply that Williams is not at all concerned about a normative dimension.

this rendition of his argument. In a later comment on what he actually argues for in IEA he says:

I do not deny, and it would be absurd to deny, that sentences of the form “A has a reason to...”(or “There is a reason for you to...” and so on) are used in ways that do not satisfy the internalist condition. My claim is, first, that when they are so used, and are not merely mistaken, the speaker intends some roughly specifiable other thing which does not mean the same in general as “A has a reason to...” such as “We have a reason to want A to...”

So it is wrong of Parfit to assume that Williams rule out the possibility of speaking of reasons in the strong normative sense. Williams does not deny that there can be something earned by speaking of reasons in the sense that “all people have a reason to do  $\phi$ ”. We are allowed to speak of it in such a manner and claim that it is a matter of truth<sup>12</sup>. When we say speak of truth and disregards psychological implications, what we mean is something different. There rests thus an ambiguity in the word reason. Williams asks not about the meaning and output of truth, but the meaning of what a person himself would, or could by sound deliberation, regard as a reason.

Hence, the meaning of reason in IER refers to the meaning extracted when we say something like: “A has a reason to  $\phi$ ”. Williams admit that this could have meant: “We have a reason to want A to  $\phi$ ”.

If one does not discern the two meanings, one can neither pay justice to what Williams argues for in IEA. That Williams has a different story to give than Parfit on statements like “We have a reason to want A to  $\phi$ ” is beside the point. Parfit answers only the question of what we mean when we say “We have a reason to want A to  $\phi$ ”.

### 4.3 Parfit again

Parfit is relying on a strong interpretation of normative reasons. He is also relying on a strong commitment to rationality. To be rational in any given situation is to correct all desires so as to coincide with a universal realm of moral reasons (whatever that is). Parfit says that there are reasons for non-virtuous people because he looks beyond the practical requirement. But while there *are* reasons for people, it does not follow that they *have*

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<sup>12</sup> Williams is nevertheless sceptical towards what difference such a matter would make. Speaking of truth like this is still an internal matter, only relevant for those capable of recognizing it. Hence, truth is spoken of differently than in Parfit’s strong sense.

reasons as well. To have a reason one must also be motivationally committed. Most people can perhaps be attuned correctly to some instrumental matters, but they cannot account for why and how this is derivative to something good in itself. They can on such a reading *have apparent* reasons. What is required for them to *have real* reasons is full substantial rationality – this latter is the capacity only of a virtuous person.

Parfit claims that normativity and rationality on desire-based theories are based on assumptions that have no such overall ethical standard. On desire-based theories what we do must in the end be explained by our desires, but these have no substantial foundation to rest on. Desires cannot yield reasons and are rationally impotent. If there is no fixed corrective of rationality, sound reasoning turns out to be quite arbitrary from agent to agent. How then, can Williams and other desire-based theorists claim that sound reasoning – rational agency – is even possible? How can Williams separate the question of “A has a reason to  $\phi$ ” from “We have a reason to want A to  $\phi$ ”. Parfit does not see how desire-based theories can meet such an objection; desire-based theories do not establish a viable foundation for normativity. The practical requirement is irrelevant in an inquiry of normativity.

Parfit elaborates on this by heeding examples of what he considers reasonable interpretations of what desire-based rationality claims. Parfit says: ‘Consider, for example, some smoker, who does not care about her further future, and whose indifference would survive informed deliberation. According to desire-based theories, this person has no reason to stop smoking’ (Parfit 2001: 24). If the person now gets lung cancer she would later see that she had a reason to stop smoking, a reason that was true all along. According to Parfit, the only theory of reasons and normativity that is capable of rationalizing that she really has a reason to stop smoking, is the one that is relying on wellbeing of either oneself or others – i.e. intrinsic object given reasons.<sup>13</sup> The conclusion is that desires cannot rationalize actions. As Korsgaard says when explaining Hume’s view on the matter:

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<sup>13</sup> Quinn proposes an argument on similar lines. He discusses a person who keeps turning on radios because he has a desire to do that, and only that. (Quinn 1993c)

‘Reason can teach us how to satisfy our desires or passions, but it cannot tell us whether those desires or passions are themselves rational; that is, there is no sense in which desires or passions are irrational or rational.’

Desire-based theories cannot explain why desires are irrational or rational. Hence, when reasons are desire-based it becomes obscure how they can have any reason-giving force at all. This is an argument that Williams may repudiate. As Williams says: ‘any rational deliberative agent has in his S a general interest in being factually and rationally informed.’ (Williams 2000: 37)

People have an interest in being factually and rationally informed because they indeed have some kind of interest in their own wellbeing. When the content of S include such elements, we see that Williams’s theory is more sophisticated than many desire-based theories. The disposition to be factually and rationally informed is of course something that carries with it rational implications for wellbeing. Parfit has not given enough attention to what Williams means with S, and the smoker has – on Williams reading – most likely a disposition to care for her future wellbeing. Further, Parfit assumes what Williams would deny, that the smoker has done some sound procedural reasoning. Williams would say that the smoker here is most likely relying on a false belief: ‘smoking is not dangerous’. Hence the agent has not reasoned soundly, and she did not have a reason to keep on smoking. Parfit can reply that this does not meet the intention of his argument, because the smoker did do some sound reasoning running out of some primitive desire in S.

Williams would ask of Parfit to show that the smoker is a realistic description of some person’s psychology. He would agree with Parfit’s diagnosis if it were a correct description of the smoker’s S including all the possible effects sound reasoning could have on it. But since ‘any rational deliberate agent’ is concerned about certain aspects of one’s wellbeing, this is an unlikely description of the psychology of some person. That people never have concern for their own wellbeing, or that there is no sound reasoning from S that could make them recognize that e.g. one has no reason to smoke, is seldom likely to be a true description of people. (Williams 1981: 105) Parfit’s problem here is not the theoretical argument itself, but whether it is a plausible description of human

psychology and a sincere interpretation of what Williams say. Most people wish to be informed about facts like ‘smoking is dangerous’.

The practical requirement ensures that examples like these are highly implausible. One cannot refute Williams by putting whatever one likes into S, and/or simply assume sound reasoning, without saying something relevant of human nature. If one were allowed to do that, we would for sure get queer internal reason statements. That they are queer may be theoretically cogent, but Williams, would say, empirically implausible. Still, internalism can admit that extreme cases might occur. This is no drawback for internalism. People are different, and it is important to have a theory that can say something relevantly of all people’s capacity for rationality, and not only for the most sophisticated ones.

Parfit tries to show how implausible the picture of normativity we get from desire-based theories. I think Parfit’s argument fails to refute Williams. Since he misunderstands what Williams means with S and sound reasoning, he present us with at best a marginal reading of Williams theory. Parfit’s argument might undermine other desire-based theories – e.g. the sub-Humean model – but not Williams’s. His insufficient reading of Williams does not, however, touch upon the deep issue; whether the practical requirement is relevant or not in a theory on practical reasons.

Parfit clings to the idea that there are reasons for someone without they ever being able to recognize these reasons. This is because reason statements are normative in the strong sense. His argument against Williams rests on little else than this. Internalism says that to have a reason it must be something that a particular agent could recognize as such. If we fail to understand that we have a reason to act in some way – even after sound deliberation – it is irrelevant that there is a reason true of us. Parfit would deny Williams’s diagnosis of his position, insisting that it is not irrelevant, even though they cannot, even by sound deliberation, recognize such reasons. Parfit’s denial of this has the sad consequence of insisting that reasons for the severely mentally handicapped child are the same reasons as to that of the virtuous person. Would it not be better to have a theory that can say that such people have other reasons? As Williams (1995: 192) writes:

But the incapacities from which these people suffer do affect what they have reason to try to do. In terms of Aristotle’s own outlook, these people have no reason to try to be like a *phronimos*, to the

extent that such a life lies beyond their competence, their understanding, and their possible motivations.

Internalism demands of us a reasonable pedagogy. A life that cannot possibly meet phronimos-standards does not mean that it has no standards at all. One can then say that Parfit's *apparent* reasons often should be fully recognized as *real* reasons, because these reasons subscribe to the optimum internal rationality of some persons.

Maybe Parfit after all commits himself to the bluff Williams accuses him of, because what good can come out of saying that a mentally handicapped child has strong normative reasons. A pedagogy based on such an insight would try to educate the child in the direction of the virtuous man. But is it not much better to base pedagogy on a less ambitious standard for this child to reach after? As Parfit has no argument on pedagogy, it is nevertheless difficult to understand what he would say. I do not think this is an excuse, but that it rather reveals an insufficiency in his argument.

#### **4.4 Dispassionate reason**

I have pursued a thought that might not pay entirely justice to Parfit's argument. Or, if Parfit himself has not been successful in refuting Williams, maybe he could have been, had he fought the battle on a different ground. This is because most of Parfit's argument has attacked Williams on a side where I believe Williams is the least vulnerable: a theory of reasons should focus on taking the practical requirement seriously. It is also paramount to give a plausible account of how S and sound reasoning should be understood. But dismissing the practical requirement does not complete Parfit's defence of externalism.

He describes a claim of Williams: '(B) Motivating reasons must be internal, since our acts must in part be explained by our desires, or other motivating states.'

Such a claim is too restrictive argues Parfit (1997: 14): 'If we reject the Humean theory of motivation, we might question (B). Some of our acts, we might claim, are fully explained by our beliefs.' In other words it is not always true that reason is subordinated by the passions. This might be true. Imagine the virtuous man again. According to Parfit this man would be able to have a dispassionate and unbiased awareness whenever he

would be confronted with something like someone's suffering. The fact itself would yield a constraint of what he knew he had reason to do, a reason to end the suffering because this is intrinsically good – something good in itself, and a reason to care for the wellbeing of others. It is this fact that first and foremost gives the virtuous man a reason to act, and it is his perception of this fact alone, which generates the process of dispassionate reasoning. Parfit can now say that reasons might be external, because one can realize and act upon a desire just by belief formation of such facts. These desires to act do not earn any of their efficacies to any earlier desires. Hence: 'Some of our acts, we might claim, are fully explained by our beliefs.' (Parfit 1997, p 112)

This argument does not rule out – what internalism does – dispassionate reasoning. If dispassionate reasoning is possible for the virtuous man, we can neither assume that it is impossible for non-virtuous persons. Some bad man, for instance the man beating his wife, could suddenly – just by believing an external reason statement – come to realize that the right thing to do is to stop beating his wife. A voicing of external reasons statements cannot then be accused of being a bluff. Neither is it an optimistic internal reason statement. When voicing it we simply hope that somehow the man would come to believe the reason statement, whatever his prior motivation was.

If this is possible, it is not right to say that externalism do not pay the practical requirement its due, because their view makes other assumptions of practical reason. While people have different desires, we never know if the desires they have could suddenly, out of the blue, be discarded by coming to see things aright. Parfit agrees that desires figures in explanations, but instead of being satisfied with the explanations we get from taking them for granted as given antecedent properties, we can ask why the desires were constituted so in the first place. He can do so because a shift in motivation can come about by merely believing something.

Brad Hooker (1987) discusses the difference between internalism and externalism in his very short article and comment on Williams's IER. He argues that Williams's internalism by and large presupposes practical reasoning as some kind of sophisticated version of instrumentalism. One of the central features of instrumentalism is that infinite regresses



of practical reasoning are not thought possible. (Millgram 2001: 4) This hangs together with another claim of instrumentalism; reasoning starts with desire.

In Williams's internalism there cannot be an endless regress – starting from S –in figuring out what to do. In the end there will be some distinct and final desires that some process of practical deliberation starts with. Different forms of deliberation like imagination, time management etc., can make it the case that some new desire will emerge, but, given Williams's theory, this desire must in some way depend on an earlier or re-evaluated desire. So while Williams thinks reasoning always starts with a desire, we need not accept this. If we do, Williams is perhaps right in dismissing externalism as nothing but bluff. But if reasoning can start with beliefs, considered here with facts or values as starting points, we cannot be sure that truly external reason statements, confronted with the bad man or non-virtuous person, always will be bluff. The dispute cannot be settled before Williams tells us why desires are metaphysically basic, i.e. before we have a convincing argument for what comes first in practical reasoning. (Hooker 1987: *ibid*)

Hurley (2001) argues in similar ways that incorporating different conceptions of practical reasoning cannot solve the truth of the matter: 'The deep issue is whether reasons or motivations are metaphysically more basic, and that arises whether or not we specify that motivations are structured by procedural rationality.' He thinks that the way we portray practical reason is merely a consequence of the question of metaphysical dependence. Substantial and procedural reasoning does not constitute a different and independent disagreement than the one concerning metaphysical dependence.

#### **4.5 Williams and instrumentalism**

It is not necessarily true, though, to portray Williams as an instrumentalist, even the advanced version of it. The question was touched upon when discussing what Williams means with S and sound reasoning. When arguing against Williams, it seems that the externalists believe that some arguments that works against the sub-humean model also applies to internalism. Perhaps it does, but the sub-Humean model is a much simpler case for how desires are constituted, and for how these desires can become satisfied by some kind of means/end reasoning. Korsgaard says of Hume:

Hume seems to say simply that all reasoning that has a motivational influence must start from a passion, that being the only possible source of motivation, and must proceed to the means to satisfy that passion, that being the only operation of reason that transmits motivational force. Yet these are separate points: they can be doubted, and challenged, separately.  
(Korsgaard, 2001, p 8)

As Korsgaard sees, Williams has only adopted the first of these claims that ‘a motivational influence must start from a passion’. Hence, Williams has not limited himself to the latter claim; that practical reasoning is of means and ends. Remember that the play of the imagination is an important element of practical reason for Williams. When reasoning is not restricted to means/end reasoning – or maybe some sophisticated version of it – desires in S will also get a completely different reading. It is left entirely open for the many possibilities that reasoning can have on S. Some people actually are concerned about getting things right, and can then resemble something like Parfit’s ideal person. S can potentially contain a desire that suffering relief is intrinsically good. S can also contain a disposition to be as open-minded, and rationally oriented as possible to ethical facts or values in the world. The conclusion is that Williams does not think it is true that internalism excludes ethical realism:

“It would also be a misunderstanding to suppose the force of the internalist view disappears if one grants that some moral (or, as I should prefer to say, ethical) statements are themselves factual: that their application is ‘world guided’” (Williams 2000: 37)

If internalism can accommodate Parfit’s externalism, Williams himself would deny that reasoning is entirely pure, devoid of conative content; he does not believe in dispassionate reasoning as Parfit does. A desire to get things right or to want what is rational, is not something that easily can be extricated from the person that actually has it. If the externalist is not entirely satisfied with this generous reading of internalism, the conclusion is nevertheless that the openness of interpretation – the quite extensive account of S – gives Williams an advantage to other desire-based theories. Internalism can, according to Korsgaard, accommodate almost any theory of ethics or rationality, as long as they are relevant in a description of someone’s psychology. As she says:

The internalism requirement is correct, but there is probably no moral theory that it excludes [...]  
The force of the internalism requirement is psychological: what it does is not to refute ethical theories, but to make a psychological demand on them. (Korsgaard, 2001, p 23)

Perhaps Korsgaard is right that internalism does not exclude any theory.<sup>14</sup> Many scholars (Hooker 1987; Cohon 1986; Parfit 1997; Quinn 1993c) then fail to recognize this theoretical openness inherent in internalism – in disapproving internalism it is not enough to refute Hume. That Williams himself is sceptical towards substantial reason, does not mean that internalism rules it out. Internalism can accommodate substantial reasoning, because it can say that S can have a general disposition to acquire true beliefs or values about the world that is not conditioned in any way by other inclinations in S. What can the externalist say to such an exploitation of S?

They would disagree on how substantial reasoning is portrayed, just because procedural reasoning still goes out from something in S – reasoning starts with a desire, or, as in this example, a disposition to be open to values in the world. In just believing something, we do not have to take the detour and say that this belief acquisition is controlled by such a disposition. Parfit would then not be satisfied with the exploitation of S here, and would say that it is the wrong picture: it is values that have meta-ethical primacy. They are true no matter how we are constituted to acquire them, and it is substantial (dispassionate) reasoning – controlled by values – that best describes ethical realism. If this is correct he also disagrees with Korsgaard when she says that internalism can incorporate whatever externalism wants, and the stalemate is still vibrant.

This does not detract from my opinion that Parfit and externalism should take the practical requirement seriously. If they did, Korsgaard's interpretation of internalism would perhaps be proven to be the best, and they would not commit themselves to the following. Properties in the world that are true independently of us, which in its turn makes a constitution of beliefs that do not owe any of its motivational energy from something within us– supposes what many have labelled a queer metaphysic. As Quinn (1993c: 235) himself recognizes: "As unpromising (or even "queer") as the objectivist

picture may seem [...], I wonder if it is not our only hope of retaining the idea of practical rationality that we want.”<sup>15</sup>

When Quinn admits that externalism is queer, I think Williams, at least, is right in saying that the burden of proof rests heavier on the externalist than on himself. In other words, a theory that portrays people’s deliberative capacity as controlled by some dispositions or desires is a more realistic description of psychology than one that does not.

#### 4.6 The desire-based student

While internalism is theoretically quite open, it does not preclude us from saying that instrumentalism can be a true account of *some* people’s psychology. Means/end reasoning is, one would think, an important element of practical reason. It is even possible that this is the only kind of reasoning that *some* people are capable of. While it is true that some people fits instrumentalism or a procedural account of practical reason, that does not mean, as I said, that Williams must take internalism to mean that *all* people do.

Consider a person that is evaluating his earlier life. In retrospection, he knows that he once was desperately eager to pursue a career in medicine; that he felt a strong urge to fulfil this goal whatever stood in his way. He remembers that the days went by figuring out how to keep up the grade scores, keep in touch with people that could be potential promoters of his career prospects, and going to the gym because he thought this was what doctors do. Sometimes secondary desires like the latter would be revised or even discarded, but his overall goal of becoming a doctor would always stand before him as an all-permeating corrective. He can now remember that he seldom, if ever, reflected over why he even wanted to pursue a career in medicine, but he will also remember that in moments of despair or depression, he doubted whether his grand goal actually would fulfil his hope of living a good life. But he would still say, in retrospection that this was quite seldom, and that youth by and large were left behind unabashed with such thoughts.

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<sup>15</sup> Objectivism is in the essence another word for externalism (if not exactly the same meaning). Practical rationality is, just as with Parfit, pictured as a substantial matter, where reasoning have the capacity to evaluate, overthrow, and produce new desires that does not depend in any way on an earlier desire. This is because facts are meta-ethically basic and not desires.

In retrospection he thinks it is correct to ascribe to his earlier self desires that had ossified to such an extent that the only reasonable picture of his reasoning was of the procedural kind. It is also, he believes, plausible that thinking about what to do back then started with this goal, or to put it in another way; that his goal figured as a constant corrective, guiding his actions. For such a person, as he was back then, strong normative reasons were irrelevant in explanation of his actions. Even though he now can question the goal he had, pointing to values he should have seen – at the time, no rational route could possibly bring that about. If we assume the same line of argumentation when speaking of the a-moralist, I think we should be inclined to think that Williams is right in assuming that external reasons statements for these people are irrelevant, because such people are quite real. The wish that people like this suddenly could come to believe external reasons statements is not plausible. That they *should* believe an external reason statement is also irrelevant; we must account for a possibility that they *could*. Internalism can accommodate that many people are like this, but if someone denies this as empirically true, internalism need not commit itself to it. It is nevertheless plausible that some people are like this, and that a theory should pay such considerations its due – something that I do not think externalism does.

## **5 Korsgaard and moral rationalism**

I will in this chapter shift focus, away from externalism. Moral rationalism thinks reasons are binding on everyone but accept the practical requirement. In 5.1 I will explain how the structure of reason can impose on us a rational commitment to principles of reasons. In 5.2 I evaluate this up against Williams understanding of internalism by voicing the moral sceptic's rationality. In 5.3 I will give a summary.

## 5.1 Principles of reason

To deny the practical requirement as a theoretical premise is basically to leave what Williams, Korsgaard and McDowell regard as the interesting essence of the discussion. Korsgaard's argument against Williams does not dispute the practical requirement. The practical requirement tells us only that if some reason fails to motivate, either it does so because that person has no reason to act or 'he has not entertained it rationally' (Velleman 1996: 697). Korsgaard believes that people do not fail to have the right motivation in S, but instead fail to entertain the content of S – motivational properties as that of the virtuous man – rationally. This is what she calls true irrationality – people fail not in being motivated, but in entertaining that motivation rationally. (Korsgaard 2001:5) Instead of arguing as the externalists do; that there *are* reasons for all people, she argues for a different claim; that people always *have* reasons, but often fail to recognize them. Korsgaard develops her argument by questioning the structure of practical reason. Ethical and rational conduct need not depend on values and facts in the world as the externalists believe: 'Ethical judgements can be explained in terms of rational standards that apply directly to conduct or to deliberation.' (Korsgaard 2001: 5)

She leaves us room for establishing a theory of normative ethics that confer normative constraints on reason alone. So Kantians can resist the weird metaphysic but still leave room for dispassionate reasoning: 'Part of the appeal of this approach lies in the way it avoids certain sources of scepticism that some other approaches meet with inevitably.' (Korsgaard, *ibid*)

She can then say that there is a sound deliberate route from Williams's S to the reasons of someone that has been brought up well. Her argument bridges the differences between some elements of externalism and internalism by assuming that there is such a sound deliberate route from whatever motivation or inclinations that S contains – something Williams doubts. She can do so by insisting that there is some element in S that all agents share. Let's repeat Williams's liberal account of S: 'S can contain such things as disposition of evaluation, patterns of emotional reactions, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called...'

As Williams says elsewhere it is also plausible that S should include whatever doubt, hesitation, or uncertainty the agent has concerning his own wellbeing, i.e. should further account for the doubt D an agent has for how exactly his evaluation, motivation, projects etc. relates to wellbeing. We can say that D is some aspect that all agents share because of some notion of freedom to think that is imposed on all agents. The crux of the matter in understanding the difference between Korsgaard's moral rationalism and what Williams' thinks internalism implies, could lie in this aspect D of the psychological make up. What is needed in a plausible account of human nature and normativity is to pay justice to an understanding of the content of human motivation in this manner, and what sort of normative dimension it must have. If this diagnosis is universal, saying something true about all agents' psychological make up, it leaves it quite unclear and open what reason a particular agent has.

A has a reason to  $\phi$  only if he could reach the conclusion to  $\phi$  by a sound deliberate route from his uncertain, indeterminable motivation.

The meaning of a 'sound deliberate route' becomes difficult to interpret when the starting point is not fixed. It yields a much too equivocal starting point for practical reasoning, and hence it would be quite difficult to say when 'A has a reason to  $\phi$ ' (Cohon 1986: 54). A new focus for practical reasoning could then be to search for some sort of secure ground, for every agent to acquire an inclination that is the upshot of a fixed point, such as a principle of reason. The disagreement between Williams and Korsgaard is whether there is such a principle of reason<sup>16</sup>:

'Williams argument does not show that if there were unconditional principles of reason applying to action we could not be motivated by them. He only thinks that there are none. But Williams' argument, like Hume's, gives the appearance of going the other way around: it looks as if the motivational point – the internalism requirement – is supposed to have some force in limiting what might count as a principle of practical reason. Whereas in fact, the real source of the scepticism is a doubt about the existence of principles of action whose content shows them to be ultimately justified.' (Korsgaard 2001: 23)

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<sup>16</sup> I was partly inspired to develop this thought by a comment McDowell made on the issue. He thinks that Korsgaard's conclusion that there is a rational route from S to seeing things aright comes from 'an attempt to exploit the indeterminacy Williams acknowledges' (McDowell in Macdonald 2006: 174)

Williams does not believe in such principles, and agrees with Korsgaard that if there were, his account of rationality would be different, i.e. the internalist requirement would turn out differently. As he says:

‘If it were true that the structure of practical reason yielded reasons for a certain kind as binding on every rational agent, then it would be true of every rational agent that there was a sound deliberative route from his or her S to actions required by such reasons.’ (Williams 2001: 94)

The practical requirement would then demand that every agent’s rationality was judged according to the Kantian structure of reason.

If we go back to the obsessed student, we saw that her S left little room for more advanced forms of motivation. She was pictured as someone with a rather primitive S – an overarching goal of becoming a prominent doctor. Her reasoning soundly would consist of no more than keeping up the grade score, having close contact with professors etc. While pursuing her day to day shores and objectives, she often had an irksome feeling that not everything was as it should be. She was not entirely sure that her plan to become doctor is what she wants. This motivationally uncertainty D of her makes us picture this student’s rationality differently. Maybe she has reason to pursue the thoughts inherent in D further. The question now is where the end of such a line of thought would lead. The goal would probably be to find something that could make her absolutely certain about how to live. Such reasoning could provide her with motivational determination. Acquiring such a determination requires perhaps some radical ideas. This motivational determination can perhaps not come about in other ways than by the provision of Kantian autonomy and universality. The reason for this is that the structure of reason that Kantian ethics provide is perhaps the only thing agents could come to recognize as certain. A determinate motivation to do something can only be so by the endorsement of some principle of reason.

It is possible that S can have such implications for sound reasoning. But why must we suppose that such implications are binding on every person’s S? Korsgaard’s challenge is to show that all people, that we consider agents, have such a psychological disposition, and that rational principles is the up shot of sound reasoning.



## 5.2 Callicles' challenge

In this section I will try to explain why I think it is best to be as inclusive as possible when it comes to theories of rationality and reasons. Korsgaard's theory is not very inclusive, claiming as it does that people share a disposition that could only make us rational by providing for Kantian principles of reasons.

The subject can be measured by comparing this dispute with similar ones in the past. I think one of the great merits of Plato's dialogue 'Gorgias' is that it elegantly provides us with considerations that may accept more than one standard of rationality (Plato 1997: *Gorgias*). By showing the irrelevancy of Socrates' argumentation to Callicles – we can see how irrelevant external reason statements become. Korsgaard accepts the internalist requirement, and her challenge is another: to affirm that it is right to judge the moral sceptic like Callicles irrational. I disagree, however, and am inclined to accept the possibility that Callicles ego-maximising views can be rational.

The dialogue is the sad proof of why Socrates' elenchus cannot be expected to convince all contestants with his moral mission. Some people are simply not susceptible to be moved by moral argumentation. Throughout the discussion with Callicles we become acquainted with a monstrous theory of justice. Callicles' justice is the virtue of the superior and powerful, the one that can subdue and take advantage of everyone as the means to maximising his own wellbeing. Socrates tries to convince Callicles that such a theory will only lead to disharmony of the soul and consequently a life less attractive than to that of Socrates' virtuous person. The problem with Socrates' arguments is that they do not seem to be any threat to Callicles. Callicles is very intent on questioning whether Socrates' view itself is rational and worth going in for. He does this by admitting the value of young peoples' pursuit of philosophy, but denying that it is a worthwhile activity in older age (*Gorgias* in Plato 1997: 828-830). He is criticising Socrates for being one of those silly old men, and is thus questioning Socrates' own view on rationality, and consequently whether Socrates is so wise and rational after all.

On the other side it is worth noting that Socrates values his opponent: ‘I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test to see whether it lives rightly or not must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness’ (Ibid). Plato might here intend to picture Callicles as a rational agent, someone that is eager to hear Socrates out, is capable of it etc. If on the other side the remark is ironically meant, the intention might be to reveal Socrates’ suspicion that he is not so after all. Another plausible interpretation of this remark, is that Plato wishes us to think this out for ourselves. Whichever interpretation we go in for, I personally, think that the dialogue imposes some conclusions on us. We cannot simply dismiss Callicles’ picture of rationality and monstrous virtue without argument. Perhaps we further should conclude that this dialogue opens up for more than one way of being rational. However discomfiting such a thought is, it would perhaps be prudent to include Callicles’ theory of rationality, and admit that Callicles has no reason to become like Socrates. This is not only an admission that Callicles is not brought up well. Perhaps the admission is stronger; that he could never have been brought up like Socrates: He is not like Socrates, and perhaps Socrates himself, from the day he was born, also was different from most people. Williams asks us whether Callicles *ought* to be convinced and:

Is he being imprudent, for instance, acting against his own best interests? Or is he irrational in a more abstract sense, contradicting himself or going against the rules of logic? And if he is, why must he worry about that? (Williams 1987: 23)

The problem is whether it really has or could have been a good reason for Callicles to listen to Socrates. Internalism can suppose that we unfortunately must answer negatively, that different people fit different accounts of rationality, or that some people have no reason to listen to reason.

Of course, this does not mean that one justifies Callicles’ virtue. Instead we could say that he is not one of us, and that our reasons are not his. As the matter of fact has it, a theory of rationality that is able to recognize all this, is also the one that best can deal with the sceptic. Knowing what the sceptic has most reason to do, and how he most rationally can act according to it – even when we despises those reasons – is perhaps the best way to combat it. In other words ‘Know your enemy’.

So we undoubtedly agree that Callicles should listen to Socrates, but statements of the counselling sort that expresses something like ‘If I were you...’, or, ‘I think you should...’, loses all its significance and force. It is not that such statements are valueless in abstract, only that they are valueless when confronted with someone like Callicles. It does not preclude men from discussing among themselves what is moral and rational. But when they do that, internal reason statements will be true of them. Parfit, confronted with the practical requirement, gives us no theory that can cope with the moral sceptic, leaving us in despair how to educate or deal with him. There cannot be any way to persuade a husband to stop beating his wife without third party’s attempt to draw upon the husband’s S in order to change his agency. Hence, a rational argument with no connection at all to S will always be futile and pointless. To say that there *is* a true reason for the man is quite uninteresting: Moral philosophy needs pedagogy.

Korsgaard meets with another problem than Parfit. She agrees that morality needs pedagogy, but limits it to only one type; that of inducing people to live by principles of reasons. Her problem is that she simply must accuse Callicles of being truly irrational, and that people like this (maybe most of us) always are. Callicles has, according to her, something in S that makes a rational demand on him. She gives a ‘one size fits all’ account of rationality – it might be true, but I doubt it.

It is important to notice here that her argument is a modified account of internalism, and is thus no objection to the central core of it. She only points out that the S of all agents is constituted in such a way as to not rule out that Kantian principles of reason make a rational demand on them.

### **5.3 Summary so far**

Let’s now recapitulate. We have considered grounds for accepting either Williams desire based-, or Parfit’s value based theory of practical reasons. If the crux of the matter has to do with the soundness of ethical realism, we will be inclined to think that the issue of internalism and externalism does not really bring anything new into the arena of moral philosophy. I have argued that this is wrong. Parfit’s argument does not discuss the core

of Williams's argument that ethical theories must answer to a psychological demand. Ethical realists must not only show that there is moral truth, they must also argue how it is normatively relevant, including for agents that has not been properly brought up. Internalism can accommodate much of whatever that might imply, because reasoning can have all kinds of effect on S. But this issue bears partly on what comes first in practical reasoning, facts of motivation or values. I don't see how internalism can meet the claim of dispassionate reasoning starting from objective values. Williams is nevertheless, with good reasons I think, sceptical of dispassionate reason on threat of a queer metaphysic.

As Korsgaard shows, this makes him more inclined towards a more marginal theory of rationality where we need not require of sound reasoning more than simple demands of practical and informational concerns. As Williams is quite clear on, this does not mean that we will not require more of most people's rationality. Korsgaard gives us good reasons to exploit such thoughts even further, but her challenge is – apart from giving principles of reasons that are self-validating – that they apply to *all* agents. What is important to have in mind here, is that Williams and Korsgaard are concerned to give a plausible account of human nature that can accommodate all agents, whereas Parfit is concerned more with truth – what the virtuous man has reason to do. It is indeed more of an empirical question for Williams whether an agent has a reason or not, but not for Parfit. In that case it seems as if they answer different questions. Williams, apart from giving us an advanced and revised Humean picture of human rationality, where S is ethically primary; wants to have conceptions of rationality and human psychology that we actually can put to use – something that Parfit and other externalists have problems with satisfying. I do not think Parfit succeed in giving us a viable externalist position. It seems at first glance to constitute a serious challenge to Williams's internalism, but on closer inspection I do not see how it can cope with the practical requirement. Something distinctly human and internal should be given its due efficacy in a theory of action. While Korsgaard does give us a theory of how people are, I also doubt whether it gives the best picture of human psychology, and especially whether Kant's principle of reason applies to it.

What Korsgaard's argument shows is nevertheless that it can be difficult to keep the content and inclinations of S and practical reason apart. If there is something in S with a content that is motivated by whatever practical reason dictates, why even bother to postulate these psychological properties to begin with? How can we be so certain that Williams has cogently described the properties in the mind and their causal relations? As Korsgaard's argument primarily is about showing that Williams's internalism does not rule out her account of practical reason, she does not pursue the following thought at great length: 'If ethically good action is simply rational action, we do not need to postulate special ethical properties in the world or faculties in the mind.' (Korsgaard 2001: 5) So what she says is that we do not have to make presumptions of what is in the world, e.g. values, or about how practical reason is related to desires and beliefs. In the last chapter I will pursue this thought even further by developing the argument alongside what McDowell has to say on it.

## **6 McDowell and Cognitivism**

So far I have amongst other argued that externalism does not succeed in refuting internalism, on threat of a weird metaphysics and not being enough concerned with the practical requirement. In this last chapter I propose a version of externalism that I think is more successful. One of the more influential responses to IER is "Might there be external reasons?". McDowell (1995) offers here an original and very different approach to this subject. He regards himself as an exponent of externalism and offers an account of reasons that are based on values. We must not, however, associate this with values on Parfit's reading. McDowell ascribes nevertheless to a modified version of ethical realism, or, as he prefers, 'anti-anti-realism' (McDowell 1998).

In 6.1 I am going to present the background for some claims McDowell poses in this article. The reason for providing this background is that Williams and others often have misinterpreted McDowell's article (Williams 2001: 37 and n4; Pettit and Smith 2006: 142-169). In 6.2 and 6.3 I will go on to present externalism on McDowell's terms.

## 6.1 Anti-anti-realism

McDowell has, just like Parfit, done much to combat Williams's anti-realism.<sup>17</sup> As he says, Williams's approach consists of a sort of projective theory of values: 'The point of the image of projection is to explain certain seeming features of reality as reflections of our subjective responses to a world that really contains no such features' (McDowell 1998: 157).

Values are understood as psychological content that owe all their ethical significance to the subjects having them (Remember that this view of Williams does not necessarily apply to internalism). The world itself does not confer any rational and moral constraints on subjects. The subject's meta-ethical relation to the world consists of spreading its volition and attitudes on to the world, with the latter being entirely impotent.

Williams's anti-realism can seem to be only one of two choices, where the other is ethical realism treating values as part of the fabric of the world; features that exist mysteriously independent of humans. McDowell (ibid) writes:

[A]s soon as we concede that attaining truth is not simply a matter of "cognizing" evaluative facts, we must have implicitly adopted a projectivist metaphysic. This appearance reflects an assumption that, at the metaphysical level, there are just two options: projectivism and the unattractive intuitionistic realism that populates reality with mysterious extra features

McDowell disagrees with the assumptions underlying such a choice. Whereas he agrees with Williams that it is not plausible that reasoning can figure as a neutral reception of objective values in the world (the argument of queerness that was mentioned before), he neither wants to accept projectivism. Values should be regarded as projective features of an already biased psychology, but that does not preclude us from also seeing them as part of the fabric of the world. Even if features of the world cannot be extricated in a neutral manner independently of how the subjects see it that does not mean the world itself cannot confer ethical potency and constraints on the subjects.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Remember that we must distinguish between Williams's internalism and his anti-realism. What is under scrutiny here is his anti-realism. I am discussing anti-realism here in order for us to see whether the separation from internalism really is so innocent after all.

<sup>18</sup> It can be difficult to understand what exactly McDowell means. To get a grip on his philosophy one must amongst other turn to his interpretation of the later Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein has famously stated that true philosophy 'leaves everything as it is'. Our philosophical problems arise out of mistaken ideas

As I argued in 4 Parfit present us with a defence of ethical realism. I argued that his objections are somewhat insufficient and does not give a rich enough reading of Williams's internalism. However successful he is in disregarding the practical requirement and questioning Williams, his primary problem is to show us how exactly dispassionate reasoning and ethical realism can deal with the argument of queerness. Apart from justifying 'mystical' properties in the world, his theory must also show how one can retreat and distance oneself from the subjective human point of view and confer upon oneself the authority of the objective judge.

McDowell is more positive towards Williams because they both agree that such a completely unbiased authority, postulating objective values, is hard to make sense of. His agreeing that human psychology always is somewhat biased, does not, however, necessitate a retreat to the other end of the scale; that the world is empty of metaphysical meaning. McDowell rather wants us to focus on the interplay between mind and world as each conferring its own metaphysical efficacy. This interplay can be illustrated by the premise that was presented in the beginning of this thesis: direction of fit; or the difference between beliefs and desires.

Remember that both Parfit and Williams agrees about what entities occupy the mind. They agree that the old belief-desire distinction says something relevantly true about human psychology. This agreement is limited however, because they disagree what is primary of the two entities, and thus has a different understanding of practical reason. It is implicit in Williams's argument that desires, or S, are metaphysically most basic – reasoning starts with S. The opposite is true for Parfit – beliefs are metaphysically most basic. Hurley (2001: 154) argues that: 'There is [...] a tendency to assume that constitutional dependence must be one way'. She thinks that a plausible account for a theory of human nature could consider beliefs about the world and desires as mutually interdependent. She tells us that it is just as reasonably to favour a psychological dynamic

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about how language works. See (Thornton 2004: *Wittgenstein on philosophy, normativity and understanding*; McDowell 1998: *Non-cognitivism and rule following*)

that do not impose on us to choose between what is metaphysically most basic of desires or beliefs.

If we now agree about this metaphysical interdependency we could press Hurley's point much further and be suspicious of the distinction itself. This is what McDowell does.

Instead of favouring either beliefs or desires as metaphysically basic – or as in a reciprocal dynamic – McDowell can seem to bid farewell to the distinction itself.

In this respect one can say that he disagrees with Williams and Parfit at a deeper level.

Whereas I doubt the tenability of Parfit's externalism, I will now argue that McDowell has a better case. His externalism is found somewhere between the subjectivist internalism of Williams and the objectivist externalism of Parfit. As Thornton writes:

‘[McDowell's] account attempts to tread a middle ground between the radical independence and the complete dependence of the moral world on moral subjects’ (Thornton 2004: 63).

## **6.2 A concession to internalism**

McDowell's article “Might there be external reasons?” contains very roughly one objection to Williams's internalism. He rejects the basic premise of separating motivational content from practical reason. This allows him to perceive values and ethical realism differently, and perhaps more cogently than either of the others. The first part of the article is nevertheless a concession to Williams, where he shows himself to be more sympathetic towards the internal conception than the external.

He writes: ‘It is a strength of Williams's argument that he bases it on a subtle and flexible conception of the materials available to the internal interpretation.’ (McDowell 1995: 68)

McDowell refers here to the liberal conception of desire, where desire is a formal label meant to embrace conceptions as wide as disposition of evaluations and plans. Just as importantly he refers to the unrestrictive picture of reasoning, where Williams includes imagination as important. McDowell understands, just like Korsgaard, that Williams has not committed himself completely to the Humean theory. Further, he seems to disagree with Parfit's externalism when he asks rhetorically: ‘If the rational cogency of a piece of



deliberation is in no way dependent on prior motivations, how can we comprehend its giving rise to a new motivation?’ (McDowell 1995: 72)

McDowell thinks that the bluff Williams accuses externalists of committing, i.e. the charge of irrationality against those unwilling to respond to external reasons, is somewhat justified.<sup>19</sup> He says:

Moralists in particular are prone to suppose that there must be a knockdown argument, an appeal to unaided reason, which, if one could only find it, and get people to listen, would force anyone capable of being influenced by reasons at all into caring about the sorts of things one ought to care about. (Ibid: 75)

It is not plausible, says McDowell, to assume that one can make someone that is not brought up right to considering the matter aright simply by ‘directing some piece of reasoning at him’ (Ibid.). The psychological distance that exists between someone that has been properly brought up and someone that has ‘slipped through the net’, must be accounted for in a theory of practical reasons, something which internalism does. In commenting the upshot of what S and sound reasoning amounts to, McDowell writes in a later reply to Pettit and Smith:

If it were right to assume that a new true belief to the effect that one has a reason, and the associated motivation, would need to be reachable by a rational procedure, this would be a convincing argument for the restriction to internal reasons. It is plausible that something on the lines of Williams’s sketch of deliberation exhausts the possibilities for acquiring new motivations by rational thinking (McDowell 2006: 176)

If we accept Williams’s exposition of practical reason, here depicted as a rational procedure, its underlying premise of direction of fit etc., the restriction to internal reasons seems to be correct.<sup>20</sup> Coming to believe a reason statement is most plausibly effectuated in the way Williams describes internalism. The idea of a rational procedure springing from some antecedent motivational source is, moreover, an advantage for internalism when it comes to explanation of action. This is because its premises resemble the causal

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<sup>19</sup> McDowell thinks irrational is too strong though, something which Williams has conceded and retracted in later comments. McDowell’s objection to the charge of irrationality runs still deeper. I will come back to this.

<sup>20</sup> We do not need to accept it. I will come back to this.

and mechanical connections we find in science. However practical or useful the internalist approach is, the central issue here is still whether it yields the most truthful picture of the psychology of practical reasons. McDowell thinks not.

### **6.3 Externalism reconsidered**

The concession presented above seems to leave little room for externalism. But actually, the rest of McDowell's article makes this room.

He wants to keep an externalist conception of reasons in spite of his intention to incorporate the psychological demand that Williams so persuasively stress. He does this by reconfiguring what this psychological demand must be.

McDowell asks: 'the crucial question is this: Why must the external reasons theorist envisage this transition to considering the matter aright as being effected by some kind of correct reasoning?' (Ibid.) (Correct reasoning here is referring to the 'rational procedure' that was mentioned above)

The issue here relates to motivational transitions and how it can be effectuated. Williams restricts transitions to sound deliberation from S, but what is the reason for this limitation? In other words why must transitions to 'considering the matter aright' be explained by some kind of correct deliberation – the only transitions Williams allows? McDowell dwells on what considering the matter aright can mean, and concludes that Williams to swiftly has left out possibilities for transitions, and offers us an account where 'considering the matter aright' need not be restricted to correct reasoning as Williams sees it. One can come to believe an external reason statement simply by way of conversion, inspiration or the like.

This is not – as one could expect – a minor readjustment or extension of what Williams is saying. Such a readjustment could be that Williams has offered us a very reasonable picture of reasons and rationality, but that he perhaps should have been more inclusive in how transitions can come about. Or he could mean to open up the ground for dispassionate reasoning. This is not McDowell's objection. His argument is a complete revision of how psychological transitions are effected, and his primary target is to reveal and question some suppositions that internalism relies on.

The supposition is implemented in the way Williams describes S and practical reason. Why must we envision this S to be intelligibly distinguishable from deliberation? In other words, there is a distinction here between reasoning and motivation that we do not need to accept. Williams simply takes it for granted that we easily can separate reasoning from S, and that it is reasonable to describe people as being “mechanically” constituted in this way.<sup>21</sup> McDowell regards this as implausible:

Desires, in the broad ‘formal’ sense of ingredients in subjective motivational sets, are not rationally self-contained psychic phenomena, which can be unproblematically conceived as determinants, from the outside, of the shape that practical reason takes, for the individual agent whose desires they are (McDowell 1995: 78).

Practical reason and motivation cannot be disentangled.<sup>22</sup> The motivational make up constitutes and limits the structure and form of practical reason. If some motivational content changes, it is no reason to believe that the operations of practical reason stay the same either. We can illustrate this refusal to distinguish practical reason and motivation, as part of the scepticism towards the belief-desire orthodoxy that was highlighted earlier. McDowell discards the psychological account Williams relies on – the Humean way of establishing the relations among motivation, belief, and practical reason. This has implications for what we can make of internalism and externalism. For McDowell, S cannot be of such a nature that it makes sense to distinguish it from practical reason. He claims that practical rationality is shot through with normativity, that there is no such thing as practical reasoning devoid of motivational content. He regards the whole psychological enterprise as one thing, subsuming practical reason, desires and belief under the same umbrella<sup>23</sup>.

#### **6.4 Practical reason and cognitivism**

Transitions to ‘considering the matter aright’ and practical reason means now something quite different. On this reading we do not need to postulate some extra non-cognitive entity to explain action. McDowell writes:

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<sup>21</sup> McDowell calls this *psychologism* (1995: 78).

<sup>22</sup> He gives the same argument on beliefs.

<sup>23</sup> The term ‘besire’ could be applicable to McDowell’s view. See (Altham 1986; Zangwill 2007)

In the context of this kind of refusal to find ‘the rationality of internal reasons’ sufficient, the idea of not reasoning correctly might be glossed in terms of not giving a consideration the right weight in deliberation. On these lines, deliberating correctly would be giving all relevant considerations the force they are credited with in a correct picture of one’s practical predicament (Ibid.).

One does not come to acquire one’s reasons by deliberating correctly. It is more a question of being sensitive to considerations, or indeed, values, that confer metaphysical significance on those who are disposed to see them. On McDowell’s external conception of practical reason, coming to believe, and being motivated, by an external reason statement is ‘a transition *to* deliberating correctly, not one effected *by* deliberating correctly; effecting the transition may need some non-rational alteration like conversion’ (McDowell 1995: 78). A transition ‘*to* deliberating correctly’ is a transition where one becomes aware of values previously unaware of. We can say that values do the subject a favour. Practical reason is a sort of continuous interplay with the world, where something good that has been true all along may be discovered, that is exactly not best described by some sort of correct reasoning controlled by a pre-rational desire. It is not possible to distinguish the internal operation of the mind from the metaphysical efficacy inherent in the world.

In “Virtue and reason” McDowell gives his most elaborate attack on non-cognitivism. He argues here how considerations, values of the world, are intrinsically motivating (McDowell 1998). A value motivates all by itself; we do not need an extra non-cognitive entity to account for the motivation. He describes the possessor of the virtue of kindness as a person with knowledge (beliefs) that is best explained as a sort of sensitivity.<sup>24</sup> This sensitivity can be assimilated to a sort of perceptual capacity which is sufficient to account for action explanation:

The deliverances of his sensitivity constitute, one by one, complete explanations of the actions that manifest the virtue. Hence, since the sensitivity fully accounts for its deliverances, the sensitivity fully accounts for the actions. But the concept of the virtue is the concept of a state whose possession accounts for the actions that manifest it. Since that explanatory role is filled by the sensitivity, the sensitivity turns out to be what the virtue is (McDowell 1998: 51)

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<sup>24</sup> McDowell’s exposition of virtue here is his elaboration of what he takes ‘seeing things aright’ to mean. He further endorses the ‘unity of virtue’ hypotheses, which claims that having one virtue necessitates having all the others. (McDowell 1998: 52)

This is his very roughly his interpretation of Socrates' thesis that virtue is knowledge. That there is some non-rational, extra component that can motivate action independently of the agent's way of perceiving the world, a component that is totally free of rational elements and external stimuli, is wrong. Hence, two agents cannot understand and perceive the world identically, but still end up being motivated to act differently. Their worldviews compel their motive, which is accounted for by the constituency of their sensitivity.

When practical reason no longer is a rational procedure to make the content of S coherent etc., one can neither be accused of bluffing when voicing external reason statements. McDowell compares this to the case of reasons there are for listening to twelve-tone music: 'It would be odd to say that a person who finds no reasons to listen to twelve-tone music is irrational, even though the reasons are there.' Pointing to external reasons that someone should see, is, on this reading, only an attempt to help someone to focus in the direction that the value is. Becoming sensitive to values may have to be effected by, exactly what Williams deny, some form of conversion or inspiration. It is in sense, which McDowell calls himself an externalist (McDowell 1995: 78) The concept practical reason can thus be misleading, because the wording may seem to point more in the direction of a rational procedure than the reading congenial to McDowell.

## **6.5 The kind student**

Lets go back to the example with the student pursuing a career in medicine. He has now acquired new perspectives and considers his earlier goals and motivation as completely alien. Remember that his overarching goal was to pursue a career in medicine. On his renewed insight he sees clearly that what he regarded as reasons back then, were not so after all. But as he thought so at the moment having them, he will, even now, after many years admit that, at the time, his reasons back then were those that fulfilled the attainment of a career in medicine. He has changed, however, and does not care for a career in medicine anymore. What happened, how are we to explain such a transition? There has evidently been a shift in motivation here. Maybe the student's dissatisfaction of his life made feelings or desires other than that of becoming a doctor

grow stronger: gradually he became more and more sensitive to suffering and people's feelings than that of becoming a doctor. His confrontation with suffering from a day-to-day involvement with sick patients can be explained as if his sensitivity became more akin to that of a virtuous outlook.

Williams must assume that the student has come to be less occupied with career prospects by some sort of deliberation flowing out from S. He can explain this by asserting that there were some content in S that made this transition possible (perhaps something like the doubt and uncertainty D discussed above). Motivation controls the starting point, i.e. where to deliberate from, but apart from that reason is indifferent to motivational input. He claims that S somehow can be open to change by values. But if the transition was exactly not effectuated by correct reasoning, but by becoming increasingly aware and more sensitive to those features of the world that has been there all the time, and has been true all along, why cannot pointing to those features one by one suffice as an explanation of that transition. In other words, why do we need an extra, appetitive element S to explain the transition? If we are to make this conceivable we must account for the separation out of that content of the motivation that is due to some internal make up of the agent, and those features of the world that is intrinsically motivating independently of the agent?

Is it not more plausible to propose that there is no motivational antecedental properties in the agent, that motivation is an integral non-separately property of practical reason. This cognitivist challenge needs more arguments, but I think McDowell's objection to Williams nevertheless points to something that can make us suspicious as to whether internalism really is that neutral when it comes to ethical realism. If so, internalism is after all a child of the projectivism of values, and is not, after all, an all-embracing theory of ethics.<sup>25</sup>

McDowell (1995: 82) conclusion is that we do not have to accept internalism or externalism as presented by Williams:

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<sup>25</sup> Contrary to what Korsgaard thinks then.

[We can] decline the choice between, on the one hand, taking a correct view of an agent's reasons for acting to be determined (indirectly, via deliberation) by his 'passions' as they stand – Williams's internal approach- and, on the other, taking it to be determined by dispassionate Reason- in effect, the only alternative Williams allows.

There is no need to accept the psychological picture Williams draws. His account of the psychological make up allows only these two versions, his own internal conception of practical reason, and Parfit's dispassionate reasoning. The basic premise misrepresents how psychological transitions are effected, what values are, and, in effect, what we should take normative reasons to mean.

## 7. Conclusion

Internalism can accommodate many theories of ethics, something that Korsgaard's Kantian version of internalism shows. We can agree with the basic insights that internalism yields, but, if we want to, disagree with Williams's version of it. I do not think that internalism can comprise all of Parfit's externalism, however, because his account of dispassionate reasoning makes claims that are exactly not controlled by any psychological dispositions. I do not know how Parfit can deal with the accusation of a queer metaphysic that is attached to such a view. If we further cannot write off his argument as wrong, we can say it is almost irrelevant to the subject under scrutiny, and internalism has a strong case against Parfit's externalism. His argument is nevertheless a good background to question whether internalism really is that neutral when it comes to ethical realism.

My sympathy with ethical realism comes more to life with McDowell's cognitivism. His externalism rejects the basic premise, and makes us question whether internalism has presented us with the most likely account of how practical reasons should be explained. My main conclusion is that McDowell's is surely right in pointing to this deeper issue: the controversy of internalism must first of all come to terms with the belief-desire dichotomy. This allows us to express some doubts on whether internalism really is so theoretically neutral when it comes to the normativity of practical reasons. It is still difficult to draw any determinate conclusions other than pointing to the premise as something that must be argued for before settling the controversy of internalism and externalism. McDowell is the only one – considered here – that clearly points in this direction. He gives arguments in other papers on non-cognitivism, not properly discussed here, for why the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge should not easily be dismissed.



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